

Florent Piton et Françoise Imbs (dir.), Emmanuel Ntezimana (1947-1995). Être historien et citoyen engagé au Rwanda, Toulouse, Presses Universitaires du Midi, 2021, 306 p.

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Critiques about the whiteness of African studies and African history are increasingly gaining traction¹. It is no longer thought acceptable – although it still happens – to write about Africa without citing African scholars. Because of the unequal power relations structuring the field of African studies, the knowledge production on Africa by African scholars is still less accessible than that of their counterparts from the Global North, effectively invisibilizing the contributions of African historians. This is even more the case for older work by African scholars. Often published in national or regional outlets in the Global South, one needs to either consult specialized libraries, or do in-country research to locate these publications. Even in the national contexts within which they were produced, they are sometimes difficult to find. Therefore, this book bringing together a selection of previously published work by historian Emmanuel Ntezimana in the 1970s and 1980s is an important work, making accessible to a wider public the work of an often overlooked but influential and pioneering Rwandan researcher.

The book has been put together by two scholars of Rwanda: Florent Piton, historian, and Françoise Imbs, geographer. The introduction has been written by Florent Piton and places the scholar and intellectual firmly within the social and political context of Rwanda in the 1980s and early 1990s. This introduction is necessary: the articles selected are not merely those Ntezimana wrote wearing his historian hat, but also texts he produced in the context of his work as a human rights defender. Some of the historical work – such as the chapters reprinted from *Dialogue*, a Christian journal that was widely read in Rwanda – were aimed at broader audiences. The texts testify to Ntezimana not only being a gifted researcher, but also someone taking his role as public historian and public intellectual seriously – hence the subtitle of the book “*Être historien et citoyen engagé*”.

For Ntezimana, “*être historien*” and “*être citoyen engagé*” were two parts of the same coin. His historical work was also a way to speak to contemporary events in Rwandan society. Excerpts from an inaugural lecture

¹ See for example Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ, “White Privilege in African Studies: When You Are Done, Please Call Us”, January 28, 2021, <https://brittlepaper.com/2021/01/white-privilege-in-african-studies-when-you-are-done-please-call-us/> and René Odanga, “(In)Validating Crises in African Studies: Certain Reflections on Disciplinary Stagnancy”, *Bulletin en ligne du CODESRIA*, n° 12, July 2022. <https://journals.codesria.org/index.php/codesriabulletin/article/view/2210>



Ntezimana gave during the opening of the National University of Rwanda in 1986, and later published in 1990, are exemplary in this regard. While the speech is addressing the history of Rwanda, Ntezimana clearly speaks to a context in which politicians were increasingly ratcheting up ‘ethnic’ tensions. The speech castigates the essentialist and racialized use of ‘Hutu’, ‘Tutsi’ and ‘Twa’, and instead emphasizes what Ntezimana called a “*peuple-nation*” – not to be confused with the current emphasis on Rwanda as an age-old nation-state. For him, this “peuple-nation” resided in the cultural connections Rwandans forged, based on a shared language and common customs, before the Rwandan state came into being as a political entity. Within this “peuple-nation”, the lineage was far more important in terms of how people identified themselves than the ethnic categories that became later so pervasive in Rwanda, not in the least because of Belgian policies making labels such as ‘Hutu’ and ‘Tutsi’ into seemingly biological realities.

Bringing together in one book the multiplicity of genres Ntezimana authored, this volume allows for identifying pivotal points in Ntezimana’s work. Next to the aforementioned concept of “*peuple-nation*”, we also find a continued emphasis on “*convivialité*” and “*complémentarités*” that he used as lenses to grasp and explain social relations within Rwandan society². It appears both in his historical work and in the work he did with the *Association rwandaise pour la défense des droits de la personne et des libertés publiques* (ADL) in 1992. By that time, Rwanda had fallen into a deep political crisis: since 1990 the *Front Patriotique Rwandais* (FPR) was attacking Rwanda from Uganda in the north-east. The FPR mainly consisted of Tutsi who had fled Rwanda as a result of the political violence with genocidal tendencies that had been tearing through Rwanda between 1959 and 1963. Meanwhile, within Rwanda, targeted attacks on Tutsi accused of being complicit with the FPR led to several massacres by the Rwandan government. These were also reported by Ntezimana’s organisation ADL. As head of ADL, Ntezimana consistently put pressure on authorities within Rwanda to stop the violence, and also appealed to international organisations such as the United Nations, as section four of the book attests to³. Ntezimana’s emphasis on these other, alternative, less ethno-centric histories of Rwanda might thus have been grounded in historical analysis, still, they were also deeply political – an observation Piton does not fail to make in his introduction.

The volume has structured Ntezimana’s intellectual production into four thematic sections. The last section, constituted by texts from the 1990s only, brings together Ntezimana’s shorter essay-texts in which Ntezimana takes a more outspoken political and human rights stance. The first two give a good overview of the diversity of his historical work, while the third section consists of two *in memoriams*: one for Alexis Kagame, priest and historian, and undoubtedly the most influential Rwandan historian until today; and the other for Savério Nayigiziki, the first Rwandan to publish a novel in French.

While Ntezimana’s doctorate focused on the Catholic Church, the work gathered in the first two, historical, sections of the book is most impressive for its fine-grained analysis of relations of power within Rwandan society, and of the way these changed under the pressure and violence of colonialism. Based on oral histories as well as on colonial and missionary sources, the work consistently questions categories that have become dominant lenses through which Rwandan history is often seen. His chapter on Bukunzi for example shows the geographical variations in the way power was exercised within what are nowadays the contours of Rwanda. “*Le Rwanda social*”, addresses the many other cleavages – more important than ‘Hutu’ and ‘Tutsi’ – within pre-colonial Rwandan society. The chapter “*Les Réactions rwandaises aux presences européennes*” paints a multi-layered picture of the different and continually changing ways in which Rwandans engaged with colonizers, beyond a singular framework of resistance.

The *in memoriams* of Nayigiziki and Kagame are very different in tone. The *in memoriam* for Alexis Kagame suggests an ambiguous relationship to the renowned historian and his work, and points at contradictions

² Before Achille Mbembe and Francis Nyamnjoh. His use is closer to that of Nyamnjoh in Francis B. Nyamnjoh (2017), « Incompleteness: Frontier Africa and the currency of conviviality », *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, vol. 52, n° 3, pp. 253-270 than to the definition used by Achille Mbembe in *On the postcolony*, Berkeley, CA, and London, UK, University of California Press, 2001.

³ See also José Kagabo et Claudine Vidal (1994), « L’extermination des Rwandais tutsi », *Cahiers d’études africaines*, vol. 34, n° 136, pp. 537-547.

in the work and reception of Kagame's work as well. On the one hand, the *in memoriam* reads as a defence of Kagame as a historian and emphasizes the unparalleled contributions of Kagame to Rwandan history⁴. On the other hand, it also contains shrouded remarks about Kagame's monarchist, institutional – and at times ideological – approach towards Rwanda's history – at odds with Ntezimana's own work focusing on the margins of power and privileging more bottom-up approaches.

The book ends with a beautiful and heartfelt *in memoriam* by Laurent Nkusi, his fellow researcher, close colleague, and friend. It gives insight in Ntezimana as an administrator at the National University and in the more private character of Ntezimana. Together with Piton's discussion of his more public-facing persona in the introduction, it suggests that in Ntezimana's everyday "*convivialité*" and "*complémentarités*" were not merely academic concepts, but guiding principles for the Rwanda and world he wanted to build around him.

The book is an absolute must-have for everyone interested in the history of the Great Lakes. It offers thoughtful historical insights into Rwanda's history. And, at least as important, it offers alternative paradigms for studying the region's history. Ntezimana's work was clearly deeply patriotic and shares with the current regime's approach to the past a refusal to make ethnicity into a defining characteristic of Rwandan society. For Ntezimana, however, this does not result in conjuring a rosy, paradisiac past, ignoring past violence and societal conflicts.

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⁴ For a useful analysis of the critique on Kagame for not being a historian, by, most notably, Vansina, see Claudine Vidal (1988), « Alexis Kagame entre mémoire et histoire », *History in Africa*, 15, pp. 493–504.